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ABSTRACT

In this address, Richard W. Riley contends that parents' most important activity is to raise their children. Parents, educators and policymakers can work together to create a healthy and nurturing environment for all children in America. Young children absorb and later imitate adult activities they see, and they observe their parents more than they observe any other adults; thus parents are their children's first and most influential teachers. Parental involvement in a child's educational process can ensure a successful school experience. Early childhood education programs bridge the gap between home and kindergarten and play an important role in the learning process. Four critical areas need to be addressed to enhance early childhood education and services: readiness, quality childcare, improved coordination of schools and agencies, and parental involvement. Because of the way the brain works, the very early years of life are made up of critical periods of language and cognitive skill acquisition. Early childhood educators, care providers, and parents must consider this growth when developing programs. Quality childcare should provide a safe and nurturing environment for children while their parents are away at work. Agencies that provide early childhood education and schools should coordinate their efforts to provide consistency. Parents need to work with their children's educators to ensure appropriate development. (LBT)

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Remarks as prepared for delivery by
U.S. Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley

Early Childhood Conference

Atlanta, Georgia
September 11, 1998

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I'd like to open with a story that's a favorite of one of America's greatest business minds --Warren Buffett --a man who personifies some of the best American values of plain-spokenness, self-reliance, and as this story shows, common sense.

The story Mr. Buffett likes to tell involves a man who is new to town. To get a sense of the place, the man walks to the town square, where he encounters a local resident and a tough-looking German shepherd.

The newcomer asks the local: "Does your dog bite?" The man replies, "No." So the visitor reaches down to pet the German shepherd --only to have the dog lunge at his arm and tear the sleeve of his coat to shreds.

As the newcomer collects himself after this scare, he glares at the local man and says: "I thought you said your dog doesn't bite." The man replied: "I did. THIS is not my dog." The point of Mr. Buffett's story, of course, is to highlight the importance of asking the right question. Which brings me to a troubling recent episode.

Some of you may have seen the September 7th issue of Newsweek magazine. The photo featured a couple cradling a newborn child above a headline that read --"DO PARENTS MATTER?" The question referred to a story about a new book called "The Nurture Assumption."

The book's author, Judith Rich Harris, argues that peers provide the strongest influence on children. But, she saves her most outrageous argument for parents. She says to parents: "Parenting has been oversold. You have been led to believe that you have more of an influence on your child's personality than you really do."

She says the belief "that what influences children's development ... is the way their parents bring them up ... is wrong." The Newsweek reporter sums up Harris' thesis this way --"What genes don't do, peers do." This work gained credibility and notice recently when it received a prize from the American Psychological Association.

Now, I'm not a psychologist, but I am the father of four and grandfather of nine. Through personal experience and years as an advocate for better education, I can say that I don't buy her arguments.

I was glad to read in that article that many leading child development experts don't give her much credence, either. But it worries me to see such an influential magazine give such high-profile attention to this book. This sort of intellectual flame-throwing may be an effective strategy for selling books or magazines, but the children are most at risk for getting

singed.

You better believe parents matter --a lot. Parenting is the most important job that every parent will perform in their life. No other activity in our lives carries the same degree of responsibility, or influence. That's why the basic question for parents, educators and policy makers in the 90's should be --"How can we all work together to create a healthy and nurturing environment for all of America's children?"

Child psychiatrist Robert Coles talks about the influence of parents in his book, "The Moral Intelligence of Children" --he draws on decades of research to describe it this way:

[Children] absorb and take stock of what they observe, namely, us --we adults living and doing things in a certain spirit, getting on with one another in our various ways. Our children add up, imitate, file away what they observe and so very often later fall in line with the particular moral counsel we wittingly or quite unself-consciously offer them.

That makes sense. And I'm here to say no time matters more for parents than during a child's earliest years --when a healthy home environment can lay the groundwork for future success.

We've all heard the phrase "Home is where the heart is." I want to paraphrase that saying to emphasize the message every parent needs to hear --"Home is where a good start is." The parent is a child's first and most influential teacher --we must do more to reach out to families with a message about what every adult in a child's life can do in the early years to help children learn and grow.

Dr. Coles' comments explain why children whose parents are involved in their education are more likely to enjoy school and do well academically. They explain why parental attitudes about the importance of reading influence a child's literacy development. If parents set the tone early that education is important, their children are more likely to get off to a good start and want to succeed.

For millions of American families, a quality pre-school experience is also a key part of getting children prepared to learn in school. We know that children who get an early start in pre-school are most likely to succeed academically and to continue their education the longest. And yet, the level of pre-school opportunities that are now available covers less than half of all American children.

Because of the importance of the these early years, when I was governor of South Carolina in the early 1980's, I made it a focus of one of my inaugural addresses, I said that if we can't be first in education overall, we can be first in the first grade where it counts.

As a result, we started one of the largest early childhood programs for 4-year olds in the nation, and it was chosen as a national model by the National Governor's Association. We energized much greater parent involvement starting at birth and we made kindergarten mandatory. And over the years it has made a real difference in school readiness and into the later grades. That's why I'm so proud of the vision and hard work of Governor Zell Miller, and his staff here in Georgia. What a tremendous legacy he will leave his state --the first state in the nation to make

pre-school universally available for every 4-year-old. Zell has spent his tenure as Governor showing the country how to take the lead in education, and the families of Georgia are the beneficiaries.

We can find more innovation and inspiration just up Interstate 85 in North Carolina. That state's Smart Start program --developed by Governor Jim Hunt --empowers local officials to decide how best to use their Smart Start resources --child care, health care, training for care providers, or another area related to children's needs. This venture shows the collaborative power of public-private cooperation, and it's a model worth emulating.

The Georgia and North Carolina programs are just two of the most progressive efforts that are making a difference in children's lives. They capitalize on some of the latest information available, and they tackle some of the most critical needs facing America's children. Their example points up what I consider the four critical issues that we must keep in mind as we work to enhance early childhood education and services.

The first of those is readiness. The latest research on how the brain takes shape has shown us the pivotal importance of the first few years of a child's life. Researchers are only beginning to learn how a young child's environment affects the development of his or her brain --and the direct link that strong parenting plays in that development.

Our Department co-sponsored a conference late last year on this very subject --bringing together researchers, policy makers, educators and others to talk about what we know and how we can make the best use of that information. What we know can be summarized this way --the quality of experiences in the early years matters, and there appears to be critical periods in the first few years of life for acquiring certain language and cognitive skills.

Therefore, the stakes are highest in the earliest years --the stage in life when children are their most vulnerable, and the stage when it has proven hardest to build support for public investment. I know from personal experience the unique challenges that this poses ...

Now, I might not have won the support of Rodney's mother that day. But, I found through that campaign that people are hungry for information about how to meet their children's needs. It is incumbent upon all of us to reach out to families to drive home the importance of providing a mentally challenging and stimulating home environment. We need intensive public awareness campaigns to make people aware of these new findings.

I want to encourage the use of programs that prepare early childhood teachers and para professionals to include the latest neuroscience findings in their curriculum.

New teachers and teaching assistants need to understand how these findings relate to a child's emotional and intellectual development, and they need teaching strategies that capitalize on these findings.

Brain research findings about learning at the very earliest of ages are particularly critical for infants, toddlers and pre-schoolers with disabilities and their families. This research reinforces the need to identify children who are displaying any delay in development including physical,

communication, social and emotional as early as possible to enable appropriate interventions to be provided. These interventions are best provided when families are integrally involved and are learning how they can work with their child to facilitate learning. This should occur in partnership with well trained personnel in the areas of health, child care, and education.

This year our Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services working directly with all 50 states and territories reported that approximately 200,000 children under the age of three and their families and over 600,000 children ages three to five received early childhood services which we know is helping these children develop.

The children will be better prepared to learn when they enter school. Another issue we must address aggressively is quality child care. This issue has grown more complicated in the era of welfare reform. Working parents need a nurturing, stimulating environment for their children during the workday. To my mind, the massive scope of this issue makes it a prime candidate for cooperation between the public and private sectors to leverage our resources most effectively.

If the public and private sectors join forces, I am confident that we can find solutions to problems like poor training or inadequate child care providers, the quality of child care facilities, and even the matter of low pay for care givers. The research findings should motivate to do whatever possible to prevent the warehousing of our children, and to ensure that child care centers offer children a safe home away from home.

A third area of need is improved coordination between schools and agencies that provide early childhood services. Look at all the people who work with children before they get to a kindergarten class --we have Head Start professionals, child care providers, public pre-school programs, church-sponsored pre-schools, and so on --with virtually no regular linkages.
We have no consensus on what to do to help children come to kindergarten prepared to learn.

I want to challenge everyone in this room to make it a priority to build stronger ties between these sorts of agencies in your communities --and you would do well to include your local and state education agencies in this network because they can be a player in pre-K programs.

Develop strategies to cultivate early literacy skills -- Look for ways to share resources --Get together regularly to share information. When you go back home, I also urge you to sponsor and visit both early childhood programs and your local kindergarten and first grade programs. Do this for your teachers, parents, and students. We are all in this together.

We are increasing collaboration at the federal level right now. The Early Childhood Institute in our Department convened an early childhood working group with representatives from 35 federal agencies.

The group is developing an "Early Childhood Agenda" that will bring some coordination and linkages to the research areas that focus on young children and their families. We're still a year or two away from producing this agenda. But, the group is already making a difference by bringing together people and organizations that have in the past shared missions

but not information.

Finally, we must continue to improve in an area that I have covered throughout this speech --parental involvement. Parents who work with their children's educators --who closely monitor homework and grades --who encourage their children to study hard --their children are the most likely to enjoy school and do well.

A report issued after the conference on brain research that I mentioned earlier said this: "Participants agreed that parenting skills are paramount to raising healthy and literate children, and that schools have an important role to play in teaching today's students --tomorrow's parents --about what it takes to nurture a child." I could not agree more.

You know, the joys of parenthood --and grand parenthood --are many. Along with those joys come the responsibility of giving your son or daughter every chance in the world to be a strong student --a lifetime learner --a caring citizen.

That's why we must take new steps to inform parents about the significance of reading to their young children at least 30 minutes every day --the intellectual and emotional value of family gatherings such as mealtime --the need for enriching educational experiences to fertilize the growth of the circuitry in a child's brain. Parents who make these connections with their children will go a long way toward harvesting a more rewarding and fulfilling relationship with the people who represent their greatest legacy.

I want to close with a mention of a book that President Clinton recommended to me recently --a memoir by the sports columnist Mitch Albom called "Tuesdays with Morrie." When Mitch discovered that his beloved college professor, Morrie, was dying, Mitch decided to spend some time with him.

In one of his best lessons, Morrie told Mitch: "The way you get meaning in your life is to devote yourself to loving others, devote yourself to your community around you, and devote yourself to creating something that gives you purpose... "

I can think of no higher purpose than helping the next generation of Americans to grow and prosper. Your service to the children of your communities is a service to the future of America. Thank you all for your enthusiasm and dedication.

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